Newsletter of the

Juniata Valley Audubon Society

P.O. Box 32, Tyrone, PA 16686

< www.juniatavalleyaudubon.org >

Vol. 34, No. 6 - Nov/Dec 2002

The Louisiana Waterthrush: Pennsylvania's Perfect Bio-indicator of Stream Quality

By Bob Mulvihill and Steve Hoffman

The Louisiana waterthrush, one of Pennsylvania's most engaging songbirds, has one primary ecological requirement: A healthy, forested, headwater stream with lots of aquatic macroinvertebrates. Deforestation, agricultural runoff, siltation and acid mine drainage negatively affect the water quality of these streams and the suitability of this habitat for nesting waterthrushes.

But what is a waterthrush, anyway? And for those of us who care about our drinking water, trout or bass fishing, or agricultural production associated with larger streams and rivers, why is the ecological health of a little stream and its effects on a small, seldom-seen bird important? Read on!

The Louisiana waterthrush is a common nesting bird throughout much of Pennsylvania — especially in the mountainous parts of the state, where it prefers medium- to high-gradient forested streams. Along these streams, this little bird usually defends a narrow, linear territory ranging from 300 to 1000 yards in length. The waterthrush is a brownish, streak-breasted little bird with a very loud, ringing song that can be heard from hundreds of yards away, even over the noise of a rushing stream! When it isn't singing, waterthrushes often can be found walking over rocks and logs in the stream, searching for aquatic insects, rhythmically bobbing their tail.

Because first-and second-order streams (so-called headwater streams make up two-thirds or more of the total stream length in larger riparian ecosystems, stressors affecting them can have a cumulative negative effect on higher-order streams and major river systems. Monitoring the condition of

- November Program -

"ALLEGHENY WILD! ROAD SHOW." A spokesperson from the Allegheny Defense Project will offer the "Allegheny Wild!" Road Show, a multi-media presentation on the history, threats to, and future of Pennsylvania's only national forest: The Allegheny.

7 P.M., Tuesday, Nov. 19 in the chapel at Alto-Reste Park, on Plank Rd., Altoona — directly across from Wal-Mart.

— Navember Field Trip —

PRESQUE ISLE STATE PARK & A VISIT WITH ROBERT BATEMAN. Join us on an overnight trip to Presque Isle State Park, near Erie, to view diving ducks, gulls, dunlin, and if we're lucky, a jaeger. Jerry McWilliams, co-author of the book, The Birds of Pennsylvania, and Bird Records Chair for Presque Isle Audubon, will be our birding guide at Presque Isle on Sunday morning till noon. On the way home early Sunday afternoon, we'll stop at Parker's Picture Framing Gallery, in Edinboro, to meet world-renowned wildlife artist Robert Bateman. He's promoting his new book, Birds, just released in early October. After our visit at the art gallery, we'll head back to Altoona, stopping to view some waterfowl activity at Geneva Marsh. Two six-passenger vans (three seats still available), driven by Dave and Trudy Kyler, along with any car pools will depart Altoona at 8 AM on Saturday and return by 7 P.M. on Sunday. (Those traveling on their own may wish to stay and hear a talk by Bateman at Edinboro University, Cooper Hall, at 7:30 P.M.) For more information, contact Charlie Hoyer via e-mail at < charma@nb.net > or by phone at 684-7376.

Saturday & Sunday, November 23-24

[Cont'd on page 5]

The Gnatcatcher

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Juniata Valley Audubon is a chapter of the National Audubon Society, serving members in all of Blair and Bedford Counties, and portions of Cambria, Centre, Clearfield, Fulton, and Huntingdon Counties. The membership comprises National Members along with Chapter-only Members.

Evening program meetings are held in the chapel at Alto-Reste Park, Plank Road, Altoona (directly across from Wal-Mart) on the third Tuesday of the month in January, February, March, May, and September through November at 7 P.M. The public is invited to attend.

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From the Gnatcatcher's Nest

It was a tough Election Day as several key races ended with disappointing results for environmentalists. But while it didn't always emerge victorious, the League of Conservation Voters (LCV) had a major impact in dozens of races and made the environment a major issue in some of the tightest and challenging races in the nation. The LCV was able to defeat anti-environment candidates in South Dakota and Maryland and make races in New Mexico and Alabama much closer than expected — which will establish the environment as a potent political issue in future elections. The LCV waged eighteen aggressive, creative campaigns resulting in significant successes — like the defeat of "Dirty Dozen" targets Rep. George Gekas in Pennsylvania and the re-election of Environmental Champion Jim Leach in Iowa. In all, five of the LCV's Dirty Dozen were defeated, twelve of its seventeen Environmental Champions were sent back to Washington to lead on environmental issues, and seventy-seven percent of its endorsed candidates won their races.

The Pa. Game Commission has lost a court battle to keep road builders from carving an interstate highway through game land termed "exceptional game and wildlife habitat" on Bald Eagle Mountain, which PennDOT chose over the lightly populated valley below to carry I-99 from northern Blair County into Centre County.

In her column on page 7, Marcia Bonta didn't mention that they first found a dead saw-whet owl in the nets at Shaver's Creek because Jennifer wasn't sure what had killed it. Marcia said that Jen practically cried as she untangled it and then raised the nets, fearing it had been her fault. She subsequently e-mailed bird-bander Scott Weidensaul, and he suggested that it had been killed by a predator because of the wound on its neck. Then, on a subsequent evening, they found another dead saw-whet in the net on the same check as they found a live owl — barred owl, that is. After much debate, Jen has decided that she'll discontinue banding, at least temporarily and more likely permanently, for this season because she doesn't want to risk the lives of the migratory owls.

Juniata Valley Audubon is back on the Web. The Web pages contain current info on JVAS programs and field trips. A "Links" page provides many handy links to related sites. Another page contains the current JVAS Bylaws, and another lists the names and e-mail addresses of the current Board of Directors. There's a page containing information on membership — both National Memberships and Chapter-only Memberships — along with a registration form that can be printed and mailed to JVAS Membership Chair Alice Goodlin. In the near future, pages will be added that will include a history of the Chapter, breaking news, special photographs, and Marcia Bonta's column from the JVAS's newsletter, *The Gnatcatcher*. Ideas for other features are welcomed. The URL is <juniatavalleyaudubon.org>.

Since this column will not appear until the Jan/Feb 2003 issue, please accept my best wishes for a Happy Holiday Season!

R N

CONSERVATION

By Mark Henry

Audubon WatchList 2002 Indicates Birds Still Declining in Numbers

In October, the National Audubon Society released its Audubon WatchList 2002. The watch list contains 201 species of North American birds that are significantly declining in numbers. Furthermore, there are some very disturbing trends for certain species. Examples include the painted bunting, which shows a population decline in excess of 50 percent since 1970; the cerulean warbler has declined by more than 70 percent; and the Henslow's sparrow has declined by 80 percent.

What is ironic about this is that these population declines are occurring at the same time that birding is increasing in popularity. In fact, the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment reports birding as the fastest growing outdoor activity in the U.S.

Audubon hopes by publishing this information that people will care enough to take action to prevent further population declines of these species. But Audubon also believes that birds are like the canary in the coal mine. What hurts birds also can hurt people, and we need to pay attention to what is causing these declines and fix the problems. The complete WatchList can be found at Audubon's Web site < www.Audubon.org >.

Unfortunately, the Bush administration does not seem to be fixing the problems. Instead, we appear to be headed in the opposite direction and making matters worse. A couple of examples will illustrate the concern of many birders (and conservationists) with the actions of the administration.

On October 24, the U.S. Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs released a report titled "Rewriting the Rules," which outlines some of the anti-environmental actions taken by the current administration. Included in this report are proposals by the administration to suspend the proposed hardrock mining rule (reform hardrock mining) — not to defend against a court challenge on protec-

ting roadless areas in national forests and proposing to weaken the arsenic-in-water regulation. For interested JVAS members, the report can be found on the Web at <www.senate.gov/~gov_affairs/102402rollbacks.htm>.

Another example of not fixing problems involves the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. In fact, in this example, we appear to be headed in the opposite direction from conserving our birds. Presently, the Bush administration is supporting a bill that would exempt the Department of Defense from complying with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. This Act protects more than 850 species of migratory birds, and it must not be allowed to be weakened at a time when many migratory bird populations are declining.

Furthermore, many military bases provide critical habitat for some of these species; in some cases, the military has helped birds by setting aside an area for the birds to breed.

To weaken the Migratory Bird Treat Act is not the direction we should head. Concerned members of the JVAS should contact their Congressmen and voice their opposition to this bill before it becomes law. Contact can be through National Audubon's Web site at < www.capitolconnect.com/audubon/contact/registration.asp?subject=51>. #\$

Osprey Nesting Platform Planned for CCSP

The JVAS has received permission from the DCNR/Canoe Creek State Park to "construct, install, and donate an osprey nesting platform to Canoe Creek State Park." Park manager Terry Wentz says that Canoe Lake will be drawn seven feet this fall for the biennial control of aquatic weeds and for the extension of a sewage line for the park sewage collection system. It's hoped that this will provide the opportunity to get a piece of equipment on the site to set a "telephone pole."

Nesting platforms have been placed around Raystown Lake by the PGC, but no nesting has occurred. PGC ornithologist Dan Brauning believes it's worth a try at Canoe Lake due to the number of ospreys fishing there while passing through during migration. ##

Saw-whet Owl Banding at Shaver's Creek

In mid-October, my dad and I, along with Arran Shields, went up to Shaver's Creek Environmental Center to take part in the saw-whet owl banding project. Doug Steigerwalt, leader of the project, had invited us to the Center to help out.

When we arrived, Doug's assistant, Todd Campbell, was setting up the mist nets and the tape player for sounding "toots" to attract the owls. It took a while to set up, after which we went inside to wait. Every half hour we went outside to check the net. The first few times we checked, it turned up empty. But on the fourth try, we got a sawwhet owl!

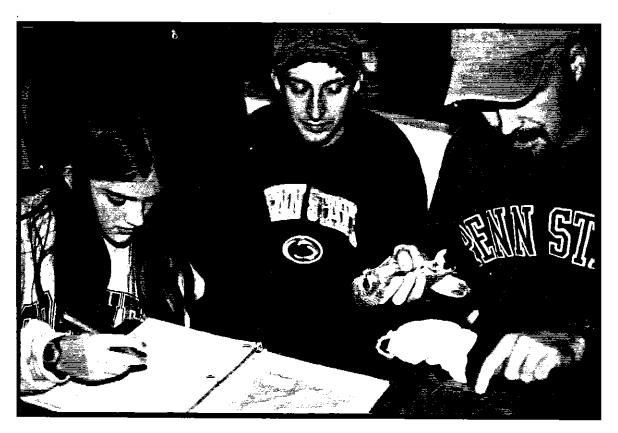
Doug gingerly removed the owl from the net and brought it inside the Center. As I recorded all the data, Doug and Todd took the owl's weight, length, etc. Then we put a band on the owl's leg and we were ready to release it.

We went outside and chose a spot in the woods to release the owl. One of the volunteers put the owl on his arm to release it. The owl flew off into the trees and landed on a nearby branch. Suddenly, just as the saw-whet landed, a large barred owl flew up from the same branch! Everyone ducked for cover as the barred owl swooped at us. Then it flew off into the dark woods.

During the commotion, we had lost the sawwhet. Then we saw him, sitting on a branch at our eye level. He took another look at us and then flew off.

It was an exciting night, and I hope we get to do it again sometime. **36**

Helena KotalaSinking Valley



Helena Kotala records data as Doug Steigerwalt prepares to band a saw-whet owl. Todd Campbell looks on.

JVAS Christmas Bird Count Set for December 21

The National Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count has become the world's largest all-volunteer bird survey. More than 45,000 people participate each year in this all-day census of early-winter bird populations. The results of their efforts are compiled into the longest running database in ornithology, representing close to more than one hundred years of unbroken data on trends of early-winter bird populations across the Americas. Simply put, the Christmas Bird Count, or "CBC," is citizen science in action.

Volunteers are the heart and soul of the CBC. From feeder-watchers and field observers to count compilers and regional editors, everyone who takes part in the Christmas Bird Count does it for love of birds and the excitement of friendly competition — and with the knowledge that their efforts are making a difference for science and bird conservation.

As long as there are birds to be counted, the Christmas Bird Count will go on being the most popular, fun, and rewarding bird census the world over!

This year, the JVAS will be doing its "Culp" bird count on December 21. CBC Coordinator Debbie Wentz again will be compiling the results. Those who helped in the past we hope to see again this year. We'd also like to see some new faces. If you think that getting out of the house and counting birds sound like a fun way to spend a winter day, give me a call and I'll fill you in on the details.

We spend a great day out in the field and then all meet in the evening for a covered-dish supper at the home of Marge and Charlie Hoyer. You can reach me by phone at 692-4224 or via e-mail at < dtw1999@adelphia.net > . \text{\$\mathcal{H}\$}

Debbie Wentz
 JVAS CBC Coordinator



... Bio-indicator [Cont'd from first page]

these small streams is an important component of any assessment of overall watershed health. Because they are so numerous within any large watershed, headwater streams can be a logistical and economic challenge to monitor. This is where employing the Louisiana waterthrush as a "bio-indicator" may help.

Widespread surveys of waterthrushes along forested headwater streams throughout Pennsylvania could add a great deal of information about overall watershed health. For example, watersheds without waterthrushes — or with extremely low densities of waterthrushes — may be an indication of poor water quality.

Territorial male waterthrushes can be surveyed effectively from accessible points along small streams by listening for their early-morning song (or by using tape song playback) from mid-April through the end of May. In addition, evidence of these birds can be gathered by searching for the

telltale whitish splay (droppings) that the species deposits habitually on exposed rocks and logs in the stream.

In general, within any forested watershed, the higher the density of nesting waterthrushes, the better the watershed's overall ecological health (or prospect for ecological recovery). Even if there are significant negative impacts acting directly on the larger order streams and rivers within a watershed, if that watershed drains an abundance of high-quality headwater streams, it will have greater prospects for recovery, and for maintaining ecological health in the future. Conversely, correcting problems within the larger-order streams in a watershed may be less successful if the condition of the watershed's headwater streams is poor.

So, why not join Audubon Pennsylvania and begin making plans now to assess the headwater streams in your watershed based on this habitat's keystone species, the Louisiana waterthrush. For more information about the bird and this monitoring project visit our Web site, http://pa.audubon.org. Instructions and data sheets can be downloaded from this Web site, or you may call the Audubon office to request that the forms be mailed to you.

A special waterthrush monitoring training session will be offered at the upcoming Third Statewide Summit for Volunteer Watershed Monitors on February 22, 2003 at the Penn Stater Conference Center, State College. **

 From the October 2002 issue of Monitoring Matters, newsletter of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History

DEP Secretary Visits Completed Acid Mine Drainage Restoration Projects in Blair County

On November 8, Pa. Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) Secretary David E. Hess toured eight passive abandoned mine drainage treatment systems as part of the Glenwhite Run Watershed Restoration Celebration in Altoona.

"These projects were imperative to the health and vitality of the Glenwhite Run Watershed," Secretary Hess said. "I applaud all the partners involved in this project and their ability to attain the funds needed to complete this much-needed and worthwhile endeavor."

Secretary Hess said the purpose of the restoration project was to improve the water quality and aquatic habitat of the Glenwhite Run Watershed that had been severely impacted by past mining practices.

"The Glenwhite Run Watershed is on the state's list of impaired waters," Secretary Hess said. "With the completion of this project, the watershed eventually will be restored and again serve as a

cleaner source of public water for the City of Altoona."

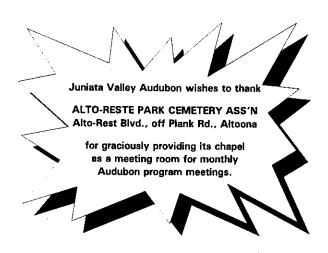
The Glenwhite Run Watershed provides approximately 90 percent of the water supply to the City of Altoona.

"The Glenwhite Run Restoration Project is a perfect example of local, state and federal partnerships working efficiently to effect a positive environmental impact," Blair County Conservation District (BCCD) Manager Donna Fisher said. "I am proud that the Blair County Conservation District, working through the Horseshoe Curve Resources Coalition, had the opportunity to orchestrate this project."

Funding for the restoration project was obtained through the state's Growing Greener program. The BCCD was awarded two grants totaling more than \$884,000.

In addition, the BCCD was awarded \$540,000 through a July 2000 Conrail Consolidated Rail Corporation (CRC) settlement. Conrail CRC was tried criminally and found guilty of illegal waste disposal, processing and storage. As part of the penalty, the company agreed to fund a Community Environmental Project in the area of their violation.

Secretary Hess said \$340,000 was earmarked specifically for the Glenwhite Run Watershed Restoration project. The remaining \$200,000 was used to fund stream restoration and watershed projects in the Frankstown and Beaverdam branches of the Juniata River. #



[•] Bob Mulvihill serves as the field ornithologist for Carnegie Natural History Museum's Powdermill Nature Reserve, near Ligonier. Bob can be contacted by phone at (724) 593-7521 or by e-mail at <mulvipnr@westol.com>.

[•] Steve Hoffman is Audubon Pennsylvania's director of bird conservation, based in Harrisburg. Steve can be contacted at (717) 213-6880 or by e-mail at <shoffman@audubon.org>.

A Love Affair

'm in love again. But my husband Bruce isn't worried. That's because my newest love is the northern saw-whet owl. Jennifer Brackbill agrees with my infatuation. "They're captivating," she told me. "I saw them at Scott Weidensaul's She patient banding station in 1999 and I thought, 'I'd like to hande do that.' Saw-whets are just amazing.

They're so small to travel so far."

By Marcia Bonta

Brackbill is a program assistant at the Raptor Center at Shaver's Creek Environmental Center. With the help of Weidensaul, she was able to obtain a master-bander permit for northern sawwhet owls from the North American Bird Banding Program in Patuxent, Maryland, and she started live-trapping and banding them in the fall of 2000.

Even though I'm an "early to bed" person, after hearing Brackbill talk at a JVAS meeting last spring, I was determined to spend an evening at Shaver's Creek watching her and her assistants band the diminutive owls. My only previous experiences with saw-whets had occurred back in October 1980 when, driving home from a JVAS program meeting, we saw one perched on an overhanging tree branch beside our road, and nearly two decades later when we heard one calling off and on in our woods for a couple weeks in late February and early March.

Bruce and our son Dave joined me at Shaver's Creek the evening of October 21. At dusk Brackbill and her husband Dustin carefully unrolled a series of five fine, handsewn, black nets, approximately 37 feet long and 7 feet high, each with five pockets near their bases to catch the owls. Then she turned on a tape player that bellowed out a steady "toottoot" saw-whet call. On a clear night the sound travels two miles or more and pulls in migrating saw-whets from the ridgetops — so the theory goes.

Every half hour we left the warmth of Shaver's Creek kitchen, switched on our flashlights, and headed down the woodland trail to check the nets. It was a glorious night lit by a full moon that shone through the trees. Carefully we shined our flashlights up and down each net. On our third trip, at half past nine, we heard an assistant say,

"Two in my net."

Starting with their butts, Brackbill slowly and patiently untangled them from the netting. Both were lively and clacked their bills as she worked. She put the first one in a drawstring cloth bag and handed it to me. It felt as light as the proverbial

feather. All the while I watched Brackbill untangle the second owl and as we walked back to the kitchen, the owl

was still. As soon as we entered the brightly lit room, the owl came alive and its tiny, sharp claws poked through the cotton.

But after Brackbill took it out of the bag and began banding, weighing, measuring, and sexing it, the owl calmed down. It turned out to be a mature female that weighed a mere three ounces. She looked around alertly and Brackbill showed us her amazing, asymmetrical ears hidden under the feathers behind her eye sockets.

Endearing is the word that comes to mind when you see a saw-whet owl close-up. Patient is another as she submitted to a series of indignities including having the underside of her wings spread open and examined under an ultraviolet light to determine her age. We took her in the bag along another woodland trail to release her. And that's when I fell in love. I put out my index finger and Shaver's Creek intern Nat placed the owl on it. Instead of taking off immediately, she appeared to enjoy the attention. Bruce took several flash photos still she sat there, swiveling her head and regarding me with large, yellow eyes.

Finally, we switched off our flashlights and in a few seconds she was gone. We wished her luck on a migration that is still poorly understood by researchers. That's why Brackbill's work at Shaver's Creek, in concert with many other banding stations stretching from Maine and Ontario to the southern Appalachians and west to Idaho, is needed to learn more about the saw-whet's migration, abundance, and ecology. An owl that we once thought was rare turns out to be a common migrant in our state. We want to keep it that way. **\$\mathbb{E}**

Audubon Educators Need Help!

Kids think that the bear rug and the stuffed dead wildlife are cool, but the old gardening magazines are bor-r-r-r-ing! Where does the "Indian village" made of Kupie dolls and Popsicle sticks fit into environmental education? Perhaps the fun-to-sit-on horse saddle could be moved to the costume room? The Quaint Corners Children's Museum, in Altoona, has asked the JVAS to renovate the Audubon Room.

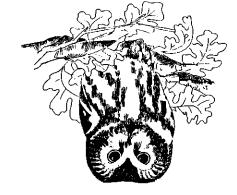
Do you have a couple of hours to help redesign a corner of this terrific, little, nonprofit museum? What a chance to deliver the Audubon message! You have no time? How about stuff? Rubber models of poisonous and nonpoisonous snakes are needed. Does anyone out there in Audubon Land have animal skins, skulls, fossils, or other nature touchables that you'll part with for the cause?

You have no stuff? How about an idea for a cheap, durable, hands-on display? Phone JVAS Education Chair Jody Wallace if you have time, stuff, or ideas to spare "for the kids."

Also wanted: The Warriors Mark Boy Scouts will be building and putting up bluebird houses this winter. They need posts (old rebar will do). They're also short on bluebird box building kits. If anyone has any kits or posts to donate, please phone Jody Wallace at 684-2425. **

– Jody WallaceIVAS Education Chair

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